

Gabriel Manrique: An Environmentalist Filmmaker

After an original idea of conducting a series of interviews focusing on the legacies of “green elders” (Trumpeter’s Vol. 26, No. 1, 2010), and after talking to Michael Caley, our Editor-at-large, I borrowed his idea of an “across generations” format, and reformulated it as an elder-upcoming dialog. The “upcoming” voice is an already experienced professional, Mr. Gabriel Manrique, who has continued an avocation of ecosophical activism through documentary filmmaking. I first saw Gabriel’s documentary on a proposal for Alcoa’s mining in Iceland and activists’ efforts to stop it. Subsequently, I was privileged to view his documentary on the porters of the Inca Trail. I showed this documentary to some of my students and colleagues. All the documentaries speak for themselves in terms of their level of professionalism, Gabriel’s innate sense of aesthetics and justice, and his own endurance (physical and emotional) in undertaking these projects in unusually perilous circumstances. After being impacted by the power and the montage of his images, I thought to myself, “Here is what Bill Devall and Arne Naess meant when they spoke (and demonstrated) of ecosophy as action.” At a time when amorphous movements like “ecopsychology” are already and quickly becoming “gentrified” (the “gentrification of green”), attracting the “emancipated” weekend suburban “green warriors” to “slow-feeding” and farm-marketing, here is a young person who risks life and limb to make our planet a better, safer, and more just place to live—in our collective name he endures what most of us would not. Serious documentary filmmaking can and does operate as “witnessing.” Gabriel Manrique adopts this “sacred” task with ample cinematographic talent. The questions I posed to him were based on a limited sense of what an “environmentalist documentary maker” (my tag) would be like. After reviewing them, Michael Caley suggested follow up questions that made the final written interview more complete. Thus, in Gabriel Manrique’s own words...

Gabriel Manrique: An Introduction (in His Own Words)

“I was born in the Peruvian mountain village of Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley, near the ruins of Machu Picchu. At the age of one our situation in Peru became precarious enough for my parents to return to Europe and we settled in Sweden. I have returned to the Andes throughout the years, last time with my debut feature length documentary *Porters of the Inca Trail*. Aside from Sweden and Peru I grew up in Germany, Greece, Argentina and the USA where I studied at high school in Las Vegas and Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Since then I have studied, lived and worked in Thailand, Japan, Australia, Iceland and more recently in Cape Verde. I studied at the University of

Gothenburg and the University of Sussex in England. Choosing the documentary genre represents a desire to create media that are accessible to a broader audience and rather than a small clique of intellectuals. It is my belief that documentaries have the potential of achieving social change simply by being in the format of moving images, because they are accessible to more individuals than a written text that needs to be decoded at an academic level. My journeys have given me many positive experiences, but they have also shown me some of the challenges we face as a species. I am therefore particularly interested in social and environmental issues, which are the foundation of London based Matchbox Media Collective through which I produce my work. The previous film, *Porters of the Inca Trail*, has been screened in festivals such as the SEE Festival, Imágenes del Sur, IDFA - Docs For Sale, and Humanities Explored. It has also been screened at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Pusterviksteatern, Hagabion - Folkets Bio, Kulturförvaltningen Göteborgs Stad, The Cowley Club, Instituto Cervantes Stockholm as well as cinemas in Cordoba of Argentina, and Ollantaytambo in Peru. The film is in distribution through Motion Pictures and recently got an offer from PressTv for TV broadcast. I continuously have several projects at various stages of production, and my current focus is on the EU's role in the depletion of Cape Verdian fish stocks. Other projects deal with homelessness in Sweden, internet piracy versus *copyleft*, a critical documentary on the development industry, migration and political exile focussing on Argentina in the 70's, conventional and sustainable energy, as well as a personal portrayal of recent Swedish musical history as seen by Nicke Ström from the iconic band Nationalteatern."

J.C-S.: How did you become a filmmaker? What made you decide on environmental and human justice (injustice) documentaries specifically?

G.M.: Environmental and social issues have always been important topics for me. I grew up travelling extensively, and as a result I saw many of those things that are usually reserved for grim news reports, but more importantly I saw many of those things that never get reported in the industrialised world. The extent of the global environmental destruction caused by our species is staggering, and very palpable if one returns to the same Andean glaciers, European forests, or South Asian reefs over a lifetime. The realities of poverty, war, segregation, and sexism, as a few examples, also stand out clearly if one has lived to see that they are global and often interconnected problems. I cannot discredit any efforts to realise a fair world where we manage our very finite resources better, but I chose the documentary mode of representation as I believe that this may have a bigger impact on a larger audience than an academic text which can only be read by those who have the intellectual tools for decoding it.

J.C-S.: *The three documentaries you made focus on different issues. The Iceland piece dealt with strip mining. The Inca Trail deals with the abuse of Peruvian indigenous (porters) people while serving overseas tourists. Lastly, your Cape Verde film addresses unfair fisheries practices and distribution of island resources. What binds these themes together?*

G.M.: The Iceland documentary actually dealt with the destruction of a pristine nature reserve, where the aluminum giant Alcoa and the Icelandic government built Europe's biggest rock fill dam solely to power a smelter in a remote village. The environmental impact report was extremely corrupt, and aside from destroying unique habitats for several rare endogamous species, the dam was constructed on an active volcanic fault line, thus posing a risk also to the humans living below.

There is not really a connection between the previous films aside from my interest in environmental and social issues. I do prefer to target topics where I have a connection with the region and the people living there, because this gives me easier access which is crucial to film making.

J.C-S.: *All three documentaries take place in foreign locations. Please explain the challenges and logistics of making documentaries abroad.*

G.M.: Actually, the documentary set in Peru was made because a friend suggested I should do something close to home. I was born in the village where much of the film is shot, and the plight of the porters has always disturbed me as I know many of them personally. This does not make the logistics easier, though. Carrying more than 20 kilos of media equipment to over 5000 meters above sea level poses a challenge, as does security since the gear is worth quite a lot. There are also issues of permits for bringing equipment into and out of foreign countries as well as coordinating the production crew, but the main problems in logistics arise from limited funding. Limited funding means limited time, which is not desirable in the documentary genre, because one has less control over events than in feature films. As long as one has enough funding to ship gear, rent cars (or mules), and more importantly enough funding/time to return to difficult locations many problems can be overcome.

J.C-S.: *How easy/difficult is it to gain the trust of the local authorities and of the people whom you interview, "for the record"?*

G.M.: This depends on the topic one approaches. The three aforementioned examples of Iceland, Peru, and Cape Verde elicited completely different responses from the authorities. In Iceland I was beaten and arrested by the police, even though I had obtained permission from Alcoa to film on the dam

as a foreign correspondent for the paper *Göteborgs Fria*. I published material in various Icelandic news papers as well as the state news broadcaster RUV, which perhaps annoyed the authorities. The police also took my camera for a day and deleted some footage of police brutality against the protesters. I was continuously persecuted, but this is because the protests against the multimillion dollar dam were highly unpopular with the authorities, who wanted to ward off nationwide dissent against the project.

In Peru I mainly encountered bureaucratic, cumbersome and indifferent authorities. As a Peruvian citizen I had the right to film in the country but obtaining permits for the Inca Trail proved extremely time consuming. The main antagonists there, however, were the tourist agencies who operate on the Trail, and since they have been known to use violence against those who oppose them, I chose to tread very carefully, also for the sake of the crew and the interviewees.

In Cape Verde we have unreserved support of the government, the local fishermen and the University of Mindelo, and this is because the antagonist we dealt with is the European Union, which is depleting the small country of its only natural resource.

The trust, or response, thus depends very much on the position you take towards the interviewee; if the person has some blame in the problem you are highlighting, or if the person is a victim/observer. In the latter case, people are generally more than happy about someone taking an interest in their lives.

J.C-S.: Which people or what ideas motivate your work (—a philosophical perspective)?

G.M.: My mother always made an effort to make her Archaeological research valuable for, and accessible to the people in the regions she has investigated, which is an important principle for me. Vicente Oieni, an exiled Argentinean historian, also inspired me in ideas of citizenship, as well as ideas of alternative historical genealogies and narratives. Generally I am motivated by egalitarian and environmentalist ideas of sustainable societies where we can survive as a species without causing such widespread destruction and suffering for such petty ends as now. Human societies are created and maintained by humans, and I therefore believe that we deep down possess the ability of changing the way in which we live.

J.C-S.: What documentaries and/or film-makers guide your own professional work—who do you emulate or model your techniques and approaches after?

The Movement towards a Third Cinema was an interesting trend in Latin America of the 70's which approached film making from a non-Hollywood perspective, where the poor and the colonised were given a voice, and I find much of that genre inspiring. Films that approach issues from a point of view that is inclusive for the audience are also important for me. *Baraka* and the *Quatsi Trilogy* are good examples of films that give a strong message about our interactions with and effects on the world around us without seeming dogmatic or overly politicised. The inherent messages in, for instance, *Baraka*, were in some ways radical for the 90's mainstream environmentalist debate, but they are presented in a way that are accessible to a global audience, no matter what preconceived ideas one might have about the film or its topics before viewing it.

J.C-S.: Given your experiences of working in these various locales and interacting with such diverse people, what emotional and/or intellectual impact do they have on you?

G.M.: Every documentary made has a lifelong impact emotionally and intellectually. In order to understand the interviewees one must engage with their lives, and sometimes one must even live with them in order to understand their situation. Choosing topics that are personally relevant is a selfish but necessary aspect of documentary film making, because one must live with and take responsibility for the resulting documentary afterwards, and this personal engagement is not easily severed. I also choose topics that I believe should be of interest to a wider audience for emotional, dramatic and aesthetic reasons and not only the inherent message of the film, so living *in* the film and the drama one is representing to others has a very deep impact.

J.C-S.: How easy/hard is it to be a young, upcoming documentary maker? Could you please address issues of production and marketing funding? Which of the three films was more challenging to produce and make?

G.M.: Funding is the main problem of documentary film making, unless you are well established. In Europe the governmental funding institutions are perishing, such as the UK Film Council who has had most of their funding pulled, and with them all the local screen councils that were the lifeline of many independent film makers. The Swedish Film Institute and regional Swedish councils now give more money but to less filmmakers (i.e. they give more funding to bigger and already established productions and less to independent film makers). At my production company, *Matchbox Media Production Collective*, we are now looking at alternative forms of funding. One strand of research is to track if Europe is moving towards a US-inspired

venture capitalist form of funding. One problem with attracting venture capitalists to documentary productions is that the final revenues of this genre are very limited. However, there is an interesting debate around *crowdfunding*, networked forms of funding as well as distribution, which we are looking into. Many film makers fund the next film with the surplus of the last film, at least to the trailer stage, when it's easier to attract funders, but the problem is that they often only get one shot at making the trailer, and if it flops they are back to stage one again. Many people finally succumb to working in environments that give some financial security, simply because the skills required for documentaries can be quite high compared to the *paycheque* approach. All my productions have been financially challenging because of the minuscule funding I received so far, but I am extremely stubborn so the films still get made. A good book on film making on a low budget which inspired me is the *Raindance Producers' Lab Lo-To-No Budget Filmmaking*. Also, funding for young aspiring film makers is still thankfully available both in Sweden and in the UK.

J.C-S.: A great deal of the ethos of the Deep Ecological movement involves activism, sometimes challenging unjust laws in order to make lasting changes. How do you relate personally and in terms of your work to that sentiment and practice?

G.M.: Thoreau advocated civil disobedience already in 1849, motivated partially by cruel practices of slavery, and I share his idea that each of us has a duty to challenge unjust laws and practices, because passivity and inaction can have very unpleasant effects. Nazi Germany, the Pol Pot regime, the Inquisition or any of the other ugly aspects of humanity pale in comparison to what could happen simply by us changing the ph-level of the oceans due to carbon emissions, whereby we wipe out the phytoplankton and consequently the atmosphere that sustains life as we know it. *Inaction, when faced with extinction, seems oxymoronic to me. Challenging laws and norms that maintain an environmentally suicidal status quo is a necessity if we are to achieve any form of lasting change, if only for the selfish drive of survival.*

J.C-S.: What would be your advice to students with similar interests and background with respect to pursuing environmental or social justice (injustice) documentary making?

G.M.: 1. Be stubborn in your ambition to make films, and stay open to new ideas as a project evolves. 2. I never work alone on a documentary, which is perhaps the best advice I can give. 3. Each film teaches skills and provides knowledge that can be used for the next project, so it's an ongoing learning process. 4. Link with networks which have similar opinions and be creative in the production and distribution of your films. 5. Be meticulous in your

research, and respectful of your interviewees. Documentary film making can be quite imposing on the interviewees' lives, so correct representation and honesty are crucial.

J.C-S.: Could you address additional issues or points not covered in the previous that you deem important?

G.M.: Technology has advanced at an incredible rate over the last decade. Anyone with a mobile phone camera can now make a documentary film, even with minimal means of post production such as a small lap top, and conventional distributors can be bypassed through the World Wide Web. The resulting film can have a greater impact than a well funded BBC documentary.

J.C-S.: What question (s) would you ask yourself?

G.M.: A) Are we headed towards a *mediascape* where traditional systems of broadcasters, distributors and studios have become obsolete to the documentary genre? B) How does this affect documentary filmmaking? C) Will audiences become saturated with documentaries, or will this new mass of information generate new ideas and modes of representation? D) Will this achieve lasting change, or will documentaries merely be another form of home entertainment?